

Pitch, Please!

How to Strike the Right Tone in Your Query Letter
(and Other Helpful Tips)

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What is a query letter for?

The query letter is a BRIEF (no more than 1-1.5 pages) introduction to you and your work. It needs to include several specific pieces of information.

The Query Letter: A Quick Outline

1. Pitch
2. Back Cover Copy
3. Bio
4. Closing and Contact Information

Where do you begin?

Start with the book, not with your bio*.

The pitch should be the opening paragraph of your query letter.

*The sole exception is memoir, when the bio and the pitch may be virtually one and the same.

The pitch is a SALES TOOL.

- Who are you selling to?
- Make your story sound as compelling as possible
- Remember that the pitch doesn't have to start where the story starts!

The pitch has four elements:

- TITLE
- GENRE
- WORD COUNT
- HOOK

Title

- A **snappy, tonally-appropriate** title appeals to someone who hasn't read the book yet.
- The title is a **marketing tool** and needs to draw people in.

Title: Bonus Tip!

Check to make sure the title isn't already in use, *especially* by something reasonably high-profile in your genre.

Goodreads (www.goodreads.com) is a great resource here.

Title (examples)

THE TEN THOUSAND DOORS OF JANUARY

REDSHIRTS

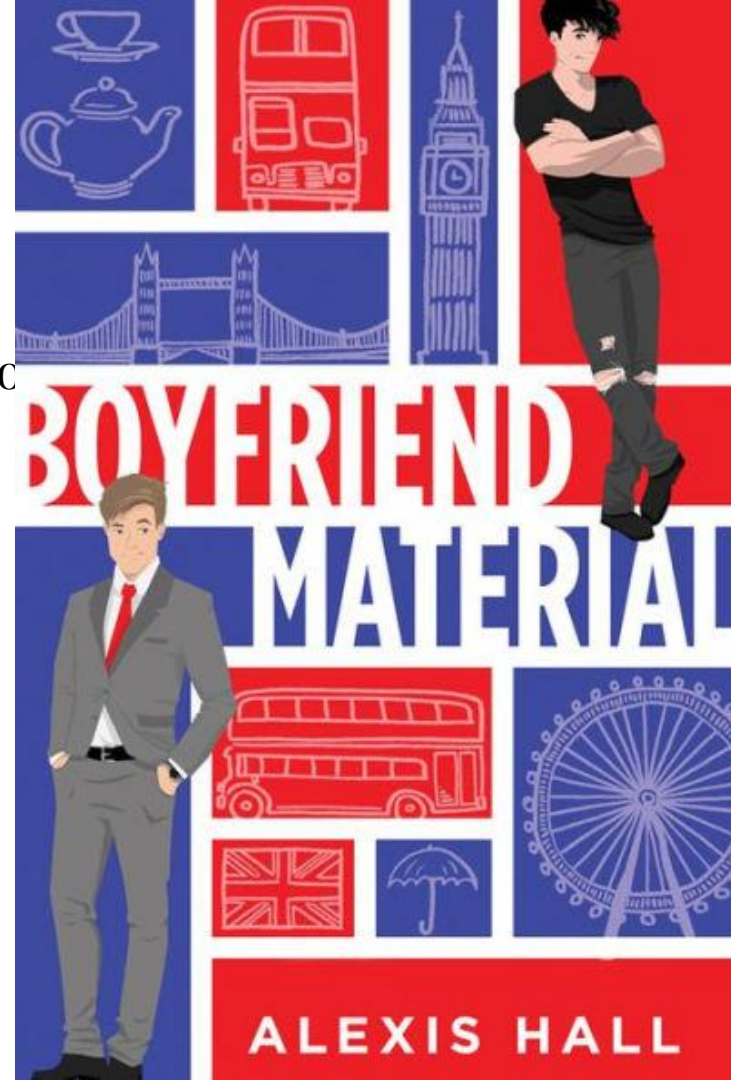
THE BOOK WITH NO PICTURES

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

WATER FOR ELEPHANTS

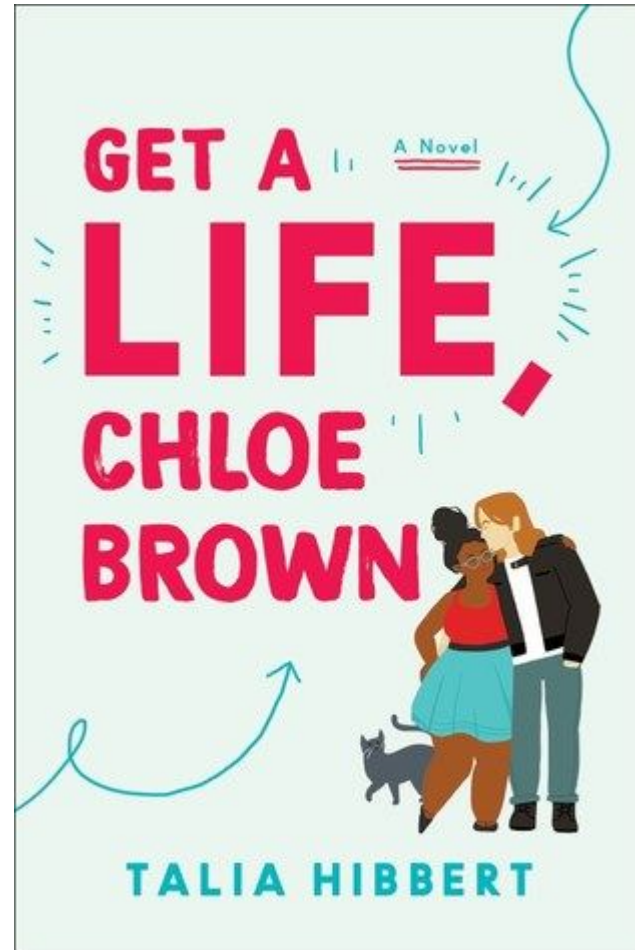
Boyfriend Material

A gay man needs a boyfriend, fast, or he risks losing his job. Easier just to pretend to date someone, though, right?



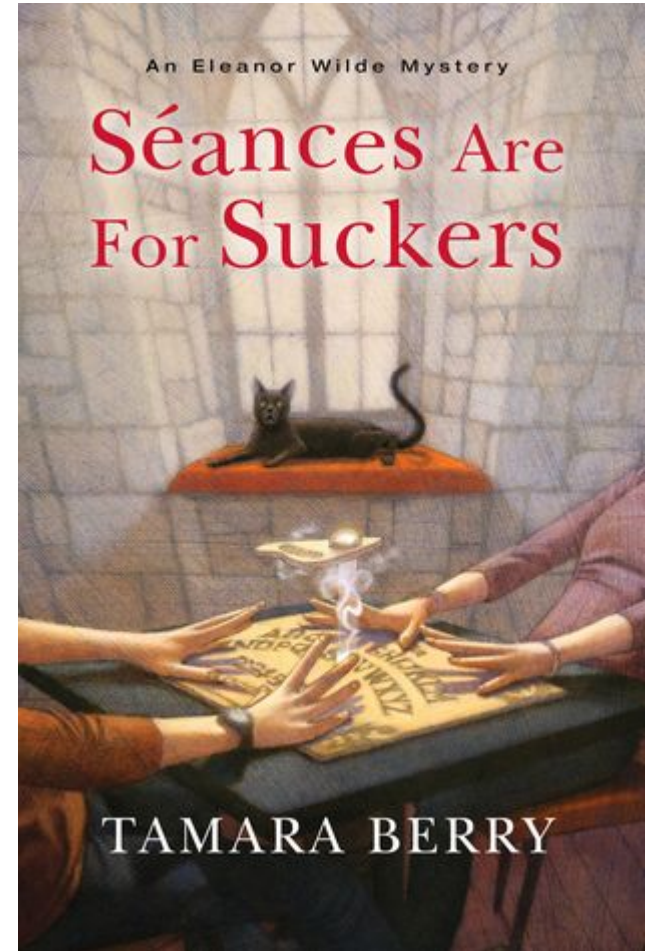
GET A LIFE, CHLOE BROWN

Titular character makes a bucket list.



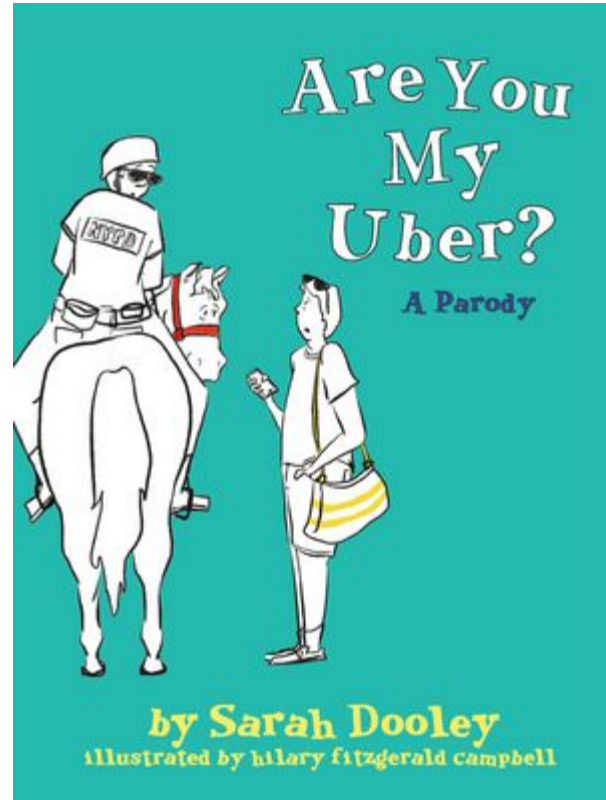
SEANCES ARE FOR SUCKERS

Fake psychic gets recruited to solve real crimes
(alliteration hints at humor level of the book)



ARE YOU MY UBER?

A parody of ARE YOU MY MOTHER?



Genre

- Pick ONE.
- Where do you want to see it on the shelf at Barnes & Noble?
- Be specific and succinct.
- Genre-bending is generally (haha) not a selling point.

Genre Conventions

Consider adding a phrase or two that showcases how your work fits into its genre. Examples might include:

- Enemies-to-lovers
- Afrofuturism
- Amateur sleuth

Genre: Comp Titles

Comp titles are **comparative** and/or **competitive**. These are the 2-3 titles that readers should and will think of when reading your book.

- “X meets Y” and/or “For fans of Z”
- Don’t diss the comps
- Don’t pick category killers
- Make sure at least one of your titles is a book (not TV, film, etc.)
- Try to choose recent titles (that you’ve read!)

Word Count

This is a really quick clue as to how well you know your genre.

The story should be the right size and shape.

Hook: the “elevator pitch”

You’ve got 30 seconds to sell someone on your idea. Go.

Here’s *Romeo and Juliet*: Girl meets boy, and it’s love at first sight—but it turns out their families are rivals, and Girl’s dad’s already got someone else picked out for her. But R&J will stop at nothing, even death, to be together.

Back Cover Copy

- 2-3 paragraphs
- Longer (but still succinct) version of the hook
- What makes your story shine?
- Leave them wanting more!

Back Cover Copy - Perspective

Think back to the last book you bought. What sold you on it?

- author whose other work you've enjoyed
- recommendation from a friend (what did the friend say?)
- some combination of the cover art and the back cover copy

Bio

Outline your credentials, as applicable (don't tell me you've been writing since you were five).

It's another chance to establish your voice!

Closing and Contact Information

Be polite and GTFO

Include at least one way to get in touch with you! Email, phone, etc.

Nuts & Bolts

- Get your own email address
- Spell my name correctly-- I care about the work I'm doing and I want you to care, too. It's also common courtesy!
- Query on only one book at a time

Nuts & Bolts (Cont'd)

- Take your time when selecting agents to query (don't spam the entire industry).
- Zero in on just a few and tell them why you've chosen them in the personalized query you send. Mentioning books the agent has represented is a really effective way of showing that you've done your homework.
- *If you don't want to do the work of personalizing, you're sending to too many people.*

Nuts & Bolts (cont'd)

- Establish a gracious, professional tone.
- Don't apologize for taking up time!
- Query letters can and should have a voice.

Things to Avoid

The biggest problem with most people's pitches: either

- they're **too generic** or
- they're **too detailed**.

What's the A story?

Things to Avoid (cont'd)

- “guaranteed bestseller”
- don't get super gimmicky:
 - letting the character write the query letter
 - “introduce [me] to [your] novel”
 - rhetorical question openers

Parting Advice

You owe it to yourself to make your query letter as good as your novel.

You may sit down to write your query and realize in the process that the novel itself needs more work, or that you need to do more research. *That's okay!*

That's not a sign of failure on your part-- it's your chance to punch up the whole package before you show it to your carefully-curated list of agents.

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